

Christmas Dawn

By EDWIN L. SABIN.

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How sweetly rests this winter night
Upon a waiting earth!
Until the light of Christmas birth,
The curtain of the dusk be drawn,
And sleeping hushes afar
Shall wake to read in radiant dawn
The message of the star!

The dawn goes marching from the east
Across a joyous world
To usher in the Christmas feast
'Neath Christmas fronds unfurled.
Now swiftly on the glory spreads,
The miracle fulfilled,
To bless a myriad bended heads
And souls by Christmas thrilled.

Behold it sweep a mighty land,
Long leagues of list'ning snow;
From whitened firs to where midst sand
The poinsettias glow.
On English thatch and tile it lies,
Chateau and hut forlorn,
And frozen steppes and tropic skies
Acclaim the Christmas morn.

No region too remote for this,
Too difficult no tongue,
The Christmas wreath, the Christmas
kiss,
The Christmas music sung,
No heart with grace so incomplete,
No head with age so gray,
No hearth so poor it does not greet
The dawn of Christmas day.



THE CHRIST CHILD'S MANGER.

Pretty but Obsolete Feature of the Latin Christmas.

All through the Italian and Hungarian quarters in New York city may be found traces of the manger at Christmas time. The Italians call it the "presepio," which means manger; the Hungarians the "Bethlehem."

The manger is an exceedingly old and interesting devotion in the Catholic countries of south Europe. St. Francis of Assisi, who was born in 1182, introduced it into Italy, and it is still the sign of Christmas in south Italy, as much as holly in the windows is the sign of it in New York. It is not many years since a carpenter could not be had for weeks before Christmas in Naples or Rome. They were all busy putting up mangers in the houses of the quality, while the poorer folk were busy fabricating their own.

This quaint old devotion is fading out of the cities of the mainland, but in conservative Sicily it remains in full force. Every family there still erects its presepio some time from the 1st to the 15th of December. It is not a manger alone, but a whole mountain side, made of the rough, flexible bark of the cork tree. Peaks and crags and precipices abound, with winding trails, houses and castles of colored cardboards, forests of evergreen twigs and sometimes tiny pipes to furnish brooks and lakes.

In the center is the grotto, with the holy family within, surrounded by the cattle. A sky of blue paper is stretched above, with the star of Bethlehem upon it. Over the hills come shepherds bearing gifts to the infant, and, though they are in Sicilian costume and carry good Sicilian cheese and wine upon their donkeys, they are all the more interesting for that.

Sometimes the presepio fills only a corner, sometimes the whole side of a room, according to the means of the family. It is kept year after year until worn out, but it needs to be freshened up each year, always a welcome task to the mother and daughters of the house.

FIRST CHRISTMAS FEAST.

The first feast to be celebrated on Dec. 25 was established by Commodus, emperor of Rome, who reigned about 185 years after the birth of Christ. After that there are many references in history to meetings of the new sect called Christians, who gathered on this day to celebrate the birth of the God-man. It is not until a century after the time of Commodus that we find a particular reference to the persecutions that the Christians underwent at the hands of the pagan emperors, culminating in a Christmas day massacre.

When Rome was no longer a pagan state the feast began to be celebrated in Christian style, and those who observed the birth of Christ in those days did so in widely separated countries and frequently at widely different periods of time and according to no set program. The ancients agreed on one thing, however—that the festival commemorating the birth of Christ should be the most magnificent of the year. In some cases it was kept up for days.

Origin of the Yule Log.

The Yule log in England is a relic of olden times. Its name is believed to be corruption of the wheel log, a wheel of the sun. The lighting of the log is reminiscent of the sacred fire kindled by the Druids at midwinter in the round towers which yet remain in many parts of Great Britain, Ireland, France and Spain.

AN OLD TIME CHRISTMAS.

The damsel donned her kirtle sheen.
The hall was dressed with holly green,
Forth to the wood did merry men go

To gather in the mistletoe.
Then opened wide the baron's hall
To vassal, tenant, serf and all.
Power laid his rod of rule aside,
And ceremony doffed his pride,
The heir, with roses in his shoes,
That night might village partner chuse;
The lord undergating share,
The vulgar game of post and pair,
All hailed with uncontrolled delight
And general voice the happy night
That to the cottage as the crown
Brought tidings of salvation down.
The fire with well dried logs supplied
Went roaring up the chimney wide.
The huge hall table's oaken face,
Scrubbed till it shone, the day to grace,
Bore then upon its massive board
No mark to part the squire and lord.
Then was brought in the lusty brawn
By old blue coated serving men;
Then the grim bear's head frowned on high.

Crested with bay and rosemary,
Well can the green garbed ranger tell
How, when and where the monster fell;
What does before his death he tore
And all the baiting of the bear.
The wassail round in good brown bowls,
Garnished with ribbons, blithely trowls,
There the huge sirloin reeked; hard by
Plum porridge stood and Christmas pie.
Nor failed old Scotland to produce
At such high tide her savory goose.
Then came the merry maskers in
And carols roared with blithesome din,
If unmelodious was the song
It was a hearty note and strong.
Who lists may in their mumming see
Traces of ancient mystery.
White shirts supplied the masquerade,
And smutted cheeks the visors made.
But, oh, what maskers richly dight
Can boast of bosoms half so light?
England was merry England when
Old Christmas brought his sports again.
'Twas Christmas broached the mightiest ale;
'Twas Christmas told the merriest tale.
A Christmas gambol oft would cheer
The poor man's heart through half the year.

—Sir Walter Scott.

AN UNORTHODOX CHRISTMAS.

I WENT to spend the day with Rose,
and then
A Christmas greeting passed between us two,
But 'twas not "Peace on earth, good will to men,"
We only said: "Good morning!" "How d'ya do?"

AND then to her I offered smilingly
The present she expected me to bring.
There were no hanging hosi, no Christmas tree,
The box was tied in paper with a string.

WE didn't sit beside the Yule log's blaze.
We just turned on the radiator's steam.
And dinner, unlike those of storied days,
Gave no plum pudding, but some bisque ice cream.

WE didn't hear the church bells' solemn toll,
And when we had our Christmas evening lunch
We didn't have a steaming wassail bowl,
But just a jug of simple claret punch.

WE trampled on traditions, I suppose,
Yet one rite we observed with care—
No, no;
Although I well remember kissing Rose,
It wasn't under the mistletoe.

—Life.

A WONDERFUL TREE.

HERE'S a wonderful tree, a wonderful tree,
The happy children rejoice to see,
Spreading its branches year by year.
It comes from the forest to flourish here.
Oh, this wonderful tree, with its branches wide,
Is always, is always blooming at Christmas-tide!

But not for us children did this tree grow,
With its strange, sweet fruit on each laden bough.
For those we love we have made with care
Each pretty thing you see hanging there.
May this wonderful tree, with its branches wide,
Bring joy to our friends at Christmas-tide!

For a voice is telling its boughs among
Of the shepherds' watch and the angels' song,
Of a holy babe in the manger low—
The beautiful story of long ago.
When a radiant star threw its beams so wide,
To herald the blessed first Christmas-tide.

Then spread thy branches, wonderful tree,
And bring the pleasant thought to me
Of him who came from his home above,
The richest gift of his Father's love.
He came to show us how to spread far and wide
The joys of the holy, sweet Christmas-tide.

—"Songs and Games for Little Ones."

The Universality of Christmas.

Primarily, of course, Christmas is a religious festival. In the Christian, with a sincere belief in the Christ, who is the foundation rock of his religion, the words of priest and pastor, exhorting his flock to observe the day with ceremonial observances, find a fervent response. From every pulpit is told anew each year the story of him without whom Christmas had never been.

But Christmas appeals also to the nonbeliever in Christ, to the men and women who cannot subscribe conscientiously to the doctrine of his divinity. It is true, perhaps, to say that as Christmas approaches the Christmas spirit is "in the air," but it is true none the less, "Peace and good will" pervade the air that is breathed alike by churchgoer and nonattendant.

In the big cities Christmas is celebrated by Christian and Jew and Mohammedan as well as by those with no religion. In the outermost corners of the earth, wherever men of Christian faith have borne the standard of civilization, the native heathen in intimate contact with them feel the coming of the spirit and rejoice.

It is well that this should be so, for the spirit of Christmas is the spirit of belief not only in Christ, but in one's fellow men. Every one may share in it if he will. Every one may find in the story of the life that was lived in Palestine nineteen centuries ago, of the death that was met on the cross and of the resurrection that followed, something of personal application, something of uplift.

The Sistine Madonna.



SISTINE MADONNA WITH FRAME.
RAPHAEL

REPRESENTING the Virgin, not as a mother, but as the all-powerful queen of the heavens, descending from clouds which are themselves composed of thousands of cherubs, Raphael's Madonna di San Sisto, more commonly known as the Sistine Madonna, ranks, by universal consent, as the greatest painting in the world.

In the Virgin's arms there is the Christ Child, whose thoughtful eyes make it appear that he is fully conscious of his destiny as Saviour of the world. On either side St. Sixtus II. and St. Catherine kneel in adoration of the queen of the heavens and the Christ Child. St. Catherine is looking down at the two cherubs, which form the base of the picture and which are familiar in popular reproductions. Sixtus II. was bishop of Rome from 257 to 258 A. D. and was martyred under Valerian.

Raphael Sanzio or Santi was born in 1483, and this picture, his masterpiece, was completed two years before his death in 1520. Thus the artist was thirty-five years old when the greatest picture of all times was completed. It was his last Madonna, although he painted others prior to this time. The Madonna was the favorite theme of painters in the renaissance era in Italy, starting with Fra Angelico, Fra Bartolommeo and others of the first painters in this period and reaching its height with the completion of the Sistine Madonna by Raphael.

This Madonna was painted as an altar piece for the church of San Sisto at Piacenza. In 1754 it was purchased by the elector Augustus III. from the Benedictine monastery and is now the property of the Royal gallery at Dresden.

Raphael, the artist, died of a fever at Rome when but thirty-seven years old. He was the son of an artist and studied at one time under Perugino. In 1504 Raphael went to live in Florence, where most of his Madonnas were painted. His fame rapidly spread until he was called to Rome to decorate the Vatican. Toward the end of his life, about the time the Sistine Madonna was completed, the artist developed his own style and did his greatest work. Aside from his ability to paint, Raphael was a talented architect.

CHRISTMAS IN BETHLEHEM.

No place in all the world has a greater interest in the Christmas season than Bethlehem. The normal population of the town where Christ was born is less than 5,000, but during Christmas week it becomes a great cosmopolitan center of 50,000 or 60,000 souls, all eager to pay homage to the place hallowed by the Saviour's birth.

In Bethlehem people are brought face to face with the wonderful scenes which are but feebly known to the rest of the world. Here they may see the place where the three wise men of the east halted after their long journey. Here they worship the shrine inclosing the manger in which Christ was born. They walk along the same road followed by the Virgin Mary in her journey to the ancient city. They see buildings and ruins which the eyes of the infant Christ rested upon. The tiny city, crescent shaped and beautiful to look upon, teems with the realities which the rest of the world celebrates.

IN FRENCH CHURCHES.

Christmas Mass Always Well Attended—Services Are Unique.

In Paris Christmas day is kept as a religious festival, and many who never dream of going to church on any other day in the year make it a point of attending mass on le Jour de Noel, and the blaze of the tapers falls on crowded congregations, men, women and children, kneeling, sitting and standing in the wide area of the Madeleine and Notre Dame.

Midnight mass is held on Christmas eve. A waxen image of the infant Saviour lies upon a little hutch of real straw in a cave built of miniature stones. The Virgin mother kneels over the child, and to quote a verse from one of the quaintest old carols:

St. Joseph, too, is near to guard the child.
To watch him, and protect his mother mild.

Often the three wise men are added, bearing offerings in their hands.

CHRISTMAS IN OTHER LANDS.

Many American children of foreign parentage know something of Christmas customs in at least one European country, having been told by their elders, but for the most part our boys and girls know little of the day except in their own land.

In Spain it is the custom to let out of prison many of the short time prisoners on Christmas eve, also to permit a few of the soldiers to go home on furlough. Only blood relations eat in the house on Christmas eve or Christmas day. It is a general belief that ere midnight on Christmas eve the Virgin comes, bearing a blessing. There is a midnight mass in the churches, and other masses follow.

A few years ago in England it was the custom after the Christmas dinner to pull bonbon crackers and to wear the grotesque caps and masks that came with them. In other ways the celebration is very much as with us.

Good cheer is the rule in Ireland, and holly and ivy are seen on every hand. A midnight mass is celebrated, and masses follow through the night and morning, all of which are largely attended. The religious element predominates. Rich and poor alike have goose for their Christmas dinner. The day following Christmas is devoted to athletics, fun and frolic.

The celebration of Christmas is not general in Japan, yet the Nipponese have a Santa Claus of their own. He is the god Hotei, and he is supposed to give good things to the children not on one day alone, but the year around.

Christmas Fortune Telling.

Bachelors and spinsters in Bohemia desirous of seeing the features of their future matrimonial mate cut a hole in the ice of a river or pond at midnight of Christmas eve and peer into the black water beneath. It is the belief that the face of the one the experimenter is to marry will then become visible as in a mirror. A combination of faith and imagination is necessary to make the spell work successfully.

THE CHRISTMAS PROBLEM SOLVED AT BORC'S

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The Christmas Spirit.

Christmas is a good institution, be it examined from any angle. The Christmas spirit is one to foster and encourage. It means unselfishness, charity, peace, liberality, good cheer, all desirable traits in themselves and all tending to make the world a better place.

While the Christmas holiday is a Christian institution in name, no one religion holds a monopoly of the Christmas spirit. It is common to all religions. It means a striving to make others happier, an effort to better conditions for mankind. It means sharing your good fortune, no matter how small the portions may be. It is the essence of the Golden Rule.

While one can do much good to others by the radiation of the Christmas spirit, the greatest good is done to oneself. No man can bestow a gift, either material or spiritual, on another without benefiting himself. He must elevate himself by the exercise of the emotions that Christmas calls forth, and this elevation must be more or less permanent. No man can be much different one day in the year from what he is the other 364 days.

So blessed be the spirit of Christmas! Exercise it during the closing days of December and you can't help but be the better for it, and you can't help but continue its benevolent influences during the months that follow.

A CHRISTMAS DREAM.

DREAMED a dream one Christmas eve.

The strangest one, you may believe.
'Twas of a world divinely fair
Beyond the blue, far off, somewhere.
There grief and tears were all unknown,
And love supreme reigned on the throne.
Ah, such a joyful, glad some world,
Where sorrow's bolts were never hurled!
Here faces gaunt with poverty
Deride the rich in mockery.
All equal there were each to each,
The best within a pauper's reach.
No surging, crushed, downtrodden masses;
No proud, elite or clan made classes;
No seasons joys for just a few
In this fair realm beyond the blue;
No staking want with piteous voice;
No poor to feed. All had their choice
Of that which seemeth just and good.
All things were rightly understood,
No broken hearts or racking pain;
No avaricious, blood bought gain;
No grasping, grinding, selfish greed
That others' welfare doth not heed.
All things were perfect as the love
That ruled this spotless world above.

Were this sad world like to my dream
And love ruled all, its right supreme,
Ah, where the chance for kindly deeds?
Were there no poor to voice their needs,
Were such a state sublimely true,
Ah, where the good that we might do?
Were there no faces dowed with tears,
Where, then, the solace of the years?
If this world knew no grief, no care,
Could we our brother's burden share?
Ah, love would lose much of its worth
Were there no charity on earth!
Perhaps 'tis better as it is
Than live in realms of perfect bliss,
For out of evil cometh good
When God is rightly understood.
And since we live mid toil and care
And not in halcyon dreams somewhere
Uplift and help thy fellow man
And do the greatest good you can
To make this world like that above,
Controlled and awayed by Christly love.
—Howard L. Wentworth.

A GIFT.

WHAT shall I send you for Christmas, dear?
What can a penniless rimester send
But the wish that when skies
are filled with gloom,
Your heart will sing snatches of sweetest song
And that every flake of the Yuletide's snow
May speak of the dreams of the long ago?

What shall I send you for Christmas, my own?
What can a lonely hardening send
But the wish that when life grows dark
and chill
The roses of summer may bloom for you still
And in moods when the fond old dreams
still cling to you
That the birds may return, my sweet, and
sing to you?

The Day After Christmas.

A graceful finish is one of the most essential touches of any successful venture. The pianist does not drop his hands abruptly from the keys as soon as he has played the last note, but holds them there a moment longer until the music dies away. Diners out would be indignant if the table were whisked clean the moment the last mouthful was swallowed. They find the lingering on a little while over the coffee and nuts most delightful.

Christmas is too beautiful and too solemn a festival to drop in this hasty fashion the moment the clock strikes midnight, for any occasion which needs especial preparation also needs an adequate closing, and particularly is this true of those things whose value lies in sentiment.

There are many things to be done after Christmas. There are letters to be written, houses to be put in order, gifts to be arranged, and every one of the countless details may be done either with grace or without it. In the theater the final curtain falls with fitting dignity or appropriate gayety. It has all been a play; but, even so, the actors do not walk off after the last word is said and allow the stage hands to rush on. That would offend the mood of the audience. How much truer this is of something which is not a play, but a very real part of life! The days after Christmas should be as mystical in their way as were the days before Christmas. The ornaments that decked the tree should be put away with the same care and pleasure with which they were brought out, the greens taken down with the same merriment that accompanied their going up. The afterglow is sometimes the most beautiful part of the sunset, and sometimes it is even more beautiful than the sunset itself.